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Statement submitted by The Hunger Project, International Planned Parenthood Federation, Let's Breakthrough, Inc., Pan Pacific and South East Asia Women's Association, Rutgers, Sonke Gender Justice Network and Unchained At Last Inc, non-governmental organizations in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council*

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.

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Statement

Breakthrough along with six organisations welcome the theme of the 63rd Session of the Commission on the Status of Women "Social protection systems, access to public services and sustainable infrastructure for gender equality and empowerment of women and girls."

While the Commission is focusing on social protection systems and access to public services, we wish to highlight that this focus is incomplete without making them effective and efficient. Impact of having improved response mechanisms can be felt when women and girls access services and get timely, sensitive response and support. One area where we see impact of weak response mechanisms are cases of early/child marriage.

A recent UNICEF report shows, more than 650 million women and girls were married before 18 years. 21 per cent of women between 20-24 years (Ending Child Marriage: Progress and prospects, UNICEF, 2014) worldwide were child brides. While early marriage is most prevalent in low and middle-income countries, it also happens in high-income countries.

While global early/child marriage rates are falling, progress has been uneven. Because of population growth in regions where early marriage is prevalent, rate of decline is slow and early marriages are projected to increase by 2030. While sub-Saharan Africa has highest rates of early marriage, South Asia has largest numbers of child brides. If there's no reduction, 1.2 billion women alive in 2050 will have married during childhood. (Ending Child Marriage: Progress and prospects, UNICEF, 2014)

Ending child marriage and early child-bearing could reduce fertility and lower population by one tenth. Analysis suggests that globally, by 2030, gains in well-being from lower population growth could reach more than USD500 billion annually. (Economic impacts of child marriage: global synthesis report. World Bank)

For children of young mothers, there are reduced risks of death or stunting by age five. Globally, benefits of lower under-five mortality and malnutrition could reach more than $90 billion annually by 2030. (Economic impacts of child marriage: global synthesis report. World Bank)

Another benefit of ending child marriage is increase in women's earnings. Due to impact of child marriage, women who marry as children have 9 per cent lower earnings. (Educating Girls, Ending Child Marriage, World Bank Report 2017)

During our work on early/child marriage for last 7 years, we observed that girls want to access and enjoy rights, but institutional, social and familial structures prevent them. In India we have laws, policies and services to prevent early marriage and support girls in accessing rights. The need to work on improving response mechanisms and services is imperative.

The first barrier to services and schemes, especially Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights related, is difficulty in access. Women's and girls' lack of sexual and reproductive agency shows in high levels of maternal mortality and morbidity, HIV/AIDS, unintended pregnancy, unmet contraceptive needs, challenges in accessing safe abortion and post-abortion care (World Bank 2014). Maternal mortality is a leading cause of death for 15-19-year-old girls (Health for World's Adolescents: A second chance in the second decade. WHO 2014). Half the abortions worldwide are unsafe, and nearly all unsafe abortions (98 per cent) occur in developing countries. Complications from unsafe abortions account for estimated 13 per cent of maternal deaths (GutInstitute, 2012, Facts on Induced Abortion Worldwide). An estimated

225 million women in developing countries have unmet contraceptive needs, either because services are unavailable or inaccessible (Adding It Up: Costs and Benefits of Investing in Sexual Reproductive Health, 2014).

While national strategies around Adolescent Sexual and Reproductive Health exist, they are not implemented or weakly implemented. According to WHO, one key factor is lack of comfort in dealing with sensitive issues, and biases from attitudes and values. These are barriers in preventing evidence-based recommendations from shaping policies, and in translating policies into action. Another is lack of capacity in planning, implementing and monitoring activities, especially those in authority positions at sub-national levels. When national Adolescent Sexual and Reproductive Health strategies are not implemented effectively, young people cannot obtain sexuality and reproductive health education and services.

Another barrier is accessing education services. A 2012 UNFPA study states girls from poor families are three times more likely to marry before 18 years (UNFPA, 2012. Marrying Too Young: End Child Marriage.). Limited schemes promoting girls' education after 14 years, limited access to education, prioritisation of boys' education contribute to perpetuate the practice. Educated women are likely to take preventive actions and seek medical services for themselves and their children (UNFPA, 2012. Marrying Too Young: End Child Marriage.). Vocational training and employment opportunities for women are limited, girls see marriage as the only option. Unsafe and unsupportive work spaces make it difficult for women to continue working.

The final challenge is combatting unequal and harmful gender norms. There are hardly support system girls can approach to raise voices against violence. They are afraid to report fearing stigmatisation, and/or their close proximity to the abuser; they feel unable to overcome institutional barriers. Girls and their families find it difficult to protest and get girls married early to protect them. Despite presence of child marriage laws, there are no formally reported incidences in India.

The continued practice of early marriage undermines efforts to improve girls' lives and end cycle of violence which results when girls/women don't have access to support mechanisms.

To improve service provision and response mechanism we need the following groups to work on:

1. **Government and duty Bearers**

   a. Health & Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights

   i. Transparency in budgeting & functioning of social protection schemes and services

   ii. Improve access to health services for adolescent girls, reaching marginalised communities

   iii. Increased budgetary allocations for effective implementation of health services.

   iv. Access to comprehensive sexuality education

   b. Education

   i. Policy change: Increase number of years of compulsory education from 8 to 12

   ii. Making sure all girls are in school till 18 years

   iii. Improving quality of education in government schools

iv. Creating task force across departments to track child marriage

c. Productivity

i. Include gender rights training in skill training institutes

d. Combating unequal gender norms

i. Stop schemes for giving money to marry off girls at 18

ii. Raising legal-age of marriage of girls

iii. Making it possible for women to own property

iv. Sensitising duty bearers and law enforcers while responding to cases of violence or against women and girls

v. Strengthening accountability and monitoring mechanisms of service providing agencies and institutions

vi. Effective implementation of laws, schemes, policies and services and reaching women and girls from marginalised communities.

2. Multi-Lateral agencies

a. Health & Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights

i. Bringing evidence and best practices in Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights to combat early marriage and inform programmes and schemes

b. Education

i. Advocacy with governments to make school education compulsory for 12 years for girls

c. Productivity

i. Advocating with governments for more employability skills and opportunities for women especially looking at the future of work

ii. Bringing evidence-based gender lens to highlight how workspaces can be made women friendly

d. Combating unequal harmful gender norms

i. Advocacy with governments for raising the legal age of marriage and plugging loopholes in law.

3. Non-governmental organizations and Implementing agencies

a. Health

i. Engaging in comprehensive sexuality education for adolescents

ii. Raising demand for health services to adolescents

iii. Bringing voice of girls and women to planning and implementation process

b. Education

i. Putting community level systems to combat drop-outs

c. Productivity

i. Removing barriers to female participation in workforce

ii. Raising, combating issues on sexual harassment in public spaces

d. Combating unequal and harmful gender norms

i. Changing narrative around marriage: Marriage as a choice, Not compulsion

ii. Promoting right to choice

iii. Mass campaigns in disseminating information about service provision

Girls are powerful agents of socioeconomic change. Data shows when girls complete secondary education, access employment and health services, they're healthier, participate in formal labour market, marry later, have fewer children and provide better healthcare and education for next generation. But harmful gender norms that forbid girls from attending schools or accessing services must be addressed and norms around marriage must be challenged.

We, the undersigned, call on the international community to send a strong message that it's time to promote sensitive and timely social protections, strengthen law enforcement to end the human-rights abuse that is early marriage. Everywhere.